

Directors help faithful to see God's presence

Continued from page 1
Goodman St.

Father Hill, who is currently on sabbatical for study at the Sexual Addiction Treatment and Training Facility in New York City, attributed this trend, in part, to the rise in the 1970s of such renewal movements as Cursillo and Charismatic Renewal, and to the growth of 12-step programs that emphasize turning to a "higher power" when dealing with problems.

An additional factor leading people to seek out spiritual direction is the pace of modern life, remarked Sister Damian Zynda, CSSF, retreat director at Our Lady of the Genesee Abbey in Piffard.

"People don't want to get caught up in the world," noted Sister Zynda, who has assisted Father Hill in teaching his spiritual direction courses at SBI. "The world's so fast they don't want to get caught up in it. Spiritual direction gives them a chance to process, and also just to sort out their lives."

Spiritual direction has been a part of seminary programs and the practice of a number of orders for many years, Father Hill explained. But the history of spiritual direction actually dates back to the church's early days.

That history was traced by Kenneth Leech in his 1977 book, *Soul Friend*.

Leech points to Scriptural roots of the idea of the shepherd — understood to be the priest in the early church — as a spiritual guide. This idea of spiritual guides was more fully developed with the rise of the Desert Fathers in Egypt, Syria and Palestine in the fourth and fifth centuries.

The tradition of spiritual direction continued as part of the monastic tradition, and among religious orders, Leech continued. It was also common among lay people during much of the church's history.

Over the years, church leaders developed various manuals for spiritual direction — such as St. Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*. The idea of what spiritual direction involves has varied, and was at times narrowly understood to be tied to "the treatment of scrupulosity, and with decisions about religious vocations," Leech



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

noted.

One of the best-known programs of spiritual growth, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, became "the foundation of a whole school of spiritual direction," Leech wrote. Indeed, among the primary means through which lay people first encounter spiritual guidance today are Ignatian retreats and the 19th Annotation programs based on the exercises.

Leech noted that spiritual direction has also been known by a number of other names, such as "soul friend," or "spiritual father."

Indeed, the name "spiritual direc-

tion" may actually be misleading, noted Sister Ann de Porres, SSJ, who serves in the House of Joseph, the Sisters of St. Joseph's spirituality ministry.

"Spiritual direction is probably a misnomer," Sister de Porres said. "It's more like listening to someone about how the Lord is acting in their lives."

"God is the director in that relationship — God takes the lead," Sister de Porres continued. "The person is trying to discern how God is acting in their lives, guiding them. The spiritual director helps them read the internal signs. The spiritual director is more of a spiritual mentor."

Thus a spiritual director listens to the person talk about his or her prayer life and relationship with God and the church, Sister de Porres explained. Indeed, she noted, one of a good director's key characteristics is the ability to listen.

A second attribute of the good spiritual director is that he or she is a person of prayer — someone who has spiritual depth, Sister de Porres continued. In addition, a good spiritual director

needs to be a trained individual, someone who knows the different kinds of spirituality, the church's teachings and even psychology.

That knowledge of psychology is helpful because sometimes the problems people bring can be better dealt with in other settings, noted Sister Jody Kearney, RSM, a staff member at the Mercy Prayer Center.

"Sometimes people come thinking it's a religious question, and it's really a psychological question," Sister Kearney said. Thus a trained spiritual director will sometimes refer the individual to therapy or pastoral counseling — with the understanding that spiritual direction may be appropriate later.

Father Blighton noted that there is a fundamental difference between spiritual direction and therapy.

"The therapist tries to alter a person's behavior," he said. The focus then is on fixing what is "wrong" with the person.

"In spiritual direction, the focus is on what's positive, say on moments when you feel grateful, to help the person to become more aware of God in those moments," the priest continued. "The role of the spiritual director is to foster the person's relationship with God, not to fix them or tell them what they should be doing."

But there are times when some "directing" needs to be done, Sister de Porres acknowledged.

"If (the person's) image of God is faulty, different from what God has revealed himself to be, you would help the person with their prayers and (help them) search the Scriptures to find a more appropriate image of God," Sister de Porres said.

And there are situations when spiritual directors can help people in times of stress and personal crisis, Sister Kearney added. Indeed, such times may provide the impetus to begin spiritual direction.

"I think there comes a time — often times it's at a crisis time in your life — when you are trying to find God's direction in your life," Sister Kearney said. "During the crisis, you are unable to find God. The spiritual director helps you to find God."

Another reason people seek spiritual direction is because they feel in a rut spiritually, Sister Kearney remarked.

In the case of FitzGibbons, it was a combination of both.

FitzGibbons first learned about spiritual direction during a Cursillo retreat in the late 1970s. He said at that time he believed he needed to improve his spiritual life.

"I was not seeing in my work, my occupation, my relationship with God," FitzGibbons said. "It seemed I was living a secular life and a religious life, but they were separate. I got caught up in my work and I didn't see it as an extension of my religious life."

He thought about finding a spiritual director, but did nothing until a few years later during a family crisis.

"I needed to see where God was in that crisis," FitzGibbons said. "I found it helpful having a companion, somebody I could bounce it off of."

He has continued in direction since, working over those years with three separate directors — a priest, and two women religious. "I've gotten enough out of it to recommend it to other people," FitzGibbons said.

Indeed, the word is getting out about spiritual direction, Sister Zynda observed.

"There are more and more spirituality institutes and houses to train spiritual directors," Sister Zynda said. "I think this is just beginning."

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